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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension involves making connections between prior knowledge and the visual information on the page. To reduce uncertainty, the reader makes orthographic, syntactic, or semantic predictions. Thus, comprehension is relative, dependent on the answers to different readers' different kinds of questions. The reader does not record a ready-made message when reading, but rather builds a singular poem based on personal response to the text. Many of the questions asked after a literature reading selection assume an intrinsic lack of motivation on the students' part. Where the discussion is regularly shaped by the teacher's or textbook editor's questions, students may stop asking or even forming their own questions. They reserve making meaning pending the discovery in class of the right answers to the right questions. A number of teachers and researchers have looked at student questions in the belief that the relation between engagement and questions is dynamic: if questioning is an outcome of engaged reading, might not also engagement be an outcome of questioning? How much better it is to generate their own questions the moment they find something obscure than to read until the end, not having the slightest notion of what they have read. Having students ask questions of themselves and of each other seems to ensure that the questions discussed are those the students really want to know about, rather than those the teacher might think they want/ought to know. (HTH)

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Response to Literature: Student Questions

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The importance of questioning to classroom reading and discussion of literature is generally taken for granted. Articles in English, education, and reading journals debate not whether to question, but when to question (permutations of before, during, and after reading), how often to question and how long to wait for answers, the value of oral versus written questions, and what kinds or levels of questions to ask. For example, in a 1973 English Journal article Hurley and Sullivan propose an "inquiry method" for teaching literature, an approach that "deals with a work of literature in the form of questions about that work and not in the form of preconceived, teacher-imposed answers." The authors contend that "for too long teachers have failed to realize that the question is more enlightening than the answer"(p.59). Styles and Cavanagh (1980), decrying "passive learning," believe that "the type of thinking a student is motivated to use is triggered by the kind of question asked"(p.25) and recommend teachers ask a range of questions from the "four levels of questioning and thinking" they identify: factual recall, convergent thinking, divergent thinking, judgmental thinking. Similarly, in a recent English Journal article, Charles Ferrara (1981), a veteran leader of "Great Books" discussions, advocates three levels of questions: factual, interpretive, evaluative. He notes that as a discussion leader, "my most challenging and rewarding discussions, my most stimulating questions arise from a sincere ignorance of what the author meant or why a participant holds a certain opinion"(p.68).

Enlightening, motivating, stimulating--these questions have more than adjectives in common, for by the account of those who define them, such questions are the preserve of the teacher, the discussion leader. Hurley and Sullivan (1973) state specifically, "The art of the teacher lies in his ability to provide leading questions that will move the student to involvement and inquiry"(p.59). But what of the questions of the students themselves? Can they engender such "involvement and inquiry"? Is there a role for student questions? Is there a rationale for encouraging them?

Psycholinguistic research gives us reason to believe that questioning is intrinsic to the fluent reading process. According to Frank Smith (1978) we have a "theory of the world in our heads" and we make sense of the world "by interpreting our interaction with the world in the light of our theory"(p.57). By means of this theory "we can exercise our imagination to invent and create, to test the possible solutions to problems and examine the consequences of possible behaviors. We can explore new worlds of our own and can be led into other worlds by writers and artists....We can use the theory of the world in our heads to predict the future. This ability to predict is the basis of our comprehension of the world"(p.64).

In the context of reading, comprehension involves making connections between prior knowledge and the visual information on the page. To reduce uncertainty, the reader makes predictions, orthographic, syntactic, or semantic. And for

Smith such prediction is in essence "a matter of asking specific questions." He writes: "We do not look at a page of print with no expectation about what we shall read next, instead we ask 'What is the hero going to do; where is the villain going to hide; and will there be an explosion when liquid A is mixed with powder B'"(p.66). He argues that "if we cannot predict, we are confused. If our predictions fail, we are surprised. And if we have nothing to predict because we have no uncertainty, we are bored"(p.67).

Thus for Smith comprehension is relative, dependent on the answers to the reader's questions, different and different kinds of questions from different and different kinds of readers. Consequently, he sees "disputes over the meaning of text, or the 'correct' way to comprehend text," as "disputes over the questions that should be asked"(p.178).

Like Smith, Louise Rosenblatt(1978) recognizes the uniqueness of the reader's response. After examining readers' responses to an unfamiliar text, Rosenblatt concludes that each reader "was not a blank tape registering a ready-made message. He was actively involved in building up a poem for himself out of his responses to the text. He had to draw on his past experiences with the verbal symbols. He had to select from the various alternative referents that occurred to him....He sometimes found it necessary to reinterpret earlier parts of the text in the light of later parts"(p.10). And while Rosenblatt does not employ Smith's terminology of

"predictions," "questions," "reduction of uncertainty," it underlies her description of reading as an active process of "developing anticipatory frameworks, sensing, synthesizing, organizing, and reorganizing"(p.69).

James Squire (1963), too, found that better readers tend to modify their interpretations while reading. By contrast, poorer readers cling to their first impression, unable to evaluate or reassess in the light of new information.

Albeit a natural and necessary component of the reading process, such questioning presupposes an engaged reader. Moffett (1976) points out that such "skills" as "recalling, comprehending, relating facts, making inferences, drawing conclusions, interpreting, and predicting outcomes" are not unique to reading but rather are thinking processes merely "reflected" in reading(p.122). He thus rejects skills programs designed to build so-called "reading comprehension." Indeed, the questions after a reading selection in such materials to "get a student to think more about what he reads" assume an "intrinsic lack of motivation" and involvement on the part of the reader(p.124).

Rosenblatt (1978) asserts: "only if the reader turns his attention inward to his experience of 'the journey itself,' will the poem happen"(p.28). And Smith (1975) makes the point that "the first critical condition is that the child must have the expectation that there is something to learn, that the uncertainty with which he is confronted is potentially

reducible to sense"(p.129). Without this expectation a reader's initial inability to comprehend becomes an end rather than a beginning.

Yet some researchers have noted a diminution of question asking in older students. In a study of fifth graders' responses to literature, Catherine Studier (1981) describes the "openness" of her subjects' responses: "First, a great many students admitted that they did not understand parts of the books. Certainly a more guarded, self-conscious (and probably older) student wouldn't feel free to do this"(p.428). Similarly, Blackie (1978) reports a decline in questioning after age 11 or 12, pointing out the risk-taking inherent in asking questions, more so than in answering them.

But we need to look further than that catchall of educational culpability, "adolescence" for an explanation of this public silence. It may in fact mirror private response, an inattention, a poverty of expectation, for which the classroom must bear some of the responsibility. In an "Op-Ed" column in the New York Times John M. Ritchie (1979), a Brookline, Massachusetts high school teacher, blames the current emphasis on "back to basics" and "minimum competency" for conveying the message to students "that becoming educated is mainly a business of acquiring marketable skills rather than a process of learning to think." He recalls that in his early years of teaching "teenagers, whatever else they didn't know, at least knew that it was important to ask questions." By contrast, "Now, students are inclined to worry about finding a

safe niche in the world, rather than to ask questions about it. They work earnestly, on the whole, but their work is directed toward tracking down the correct response to a problem, not analyzing or understanding it. They assume that the teacher has all the answers and that their job is merely to obtain them, store them up, and bubble them up when it is test time."

Rosenblatt (1976) quotes a teacher who came upon in a tenth grade anthology the old Scottish ballad, "Edward, Edward":

As I finished the poem it was as though I had been participating in a Greek tragedy in a capsule. Associations with Oedipus and Orestes were a measure of my involvement. And then I turned the page--'What is the name of this kind of poem? What characteristics does it share with other poems of this type? What is the effect of the refrain?'

The shock of these questions drew me away from all that I had undergone in reading the text--the structure of feeling called forth by the pattern of events, my darkening mood as I saw the destruction of the family by the son's desperate crime and desperate penance, the horror of the final interchange. For the moment, I was the student, rudely torn from all this by the textbook editor's questions(p.69).

Where the discussion is regularly shaped by the teacher's questions, the editor's questions, students may stop asking or even forming their own. They reserve making meaning pending the discovery in class of the right questions as well as the right answers.

A number of teachers and researchers have looked at student questions in the belief that the relation between engagement and questioning is dynamic. If questioning is an outcome of engaged reading, might not also engagement be an

outcome of questioning?

Ortiz (1977), observing her own reading process, recognizes the role that questioning plays in fostering her comprehension: "When I had to read something that didn't interest me, I could acquire and maintain interest by deliberately forcing questions. The hunt for the answers was what kept me engrossed"(p.109). She asked students to question as they read informational material and discovered that "Reading was turning into an active process which involved a dialogue with the material--curtailing the battle between daydreaming and reading How much better it was to generate their own questions at the moment they found something obscure than to read until the end, not having the slightest notion of what they had read!" (p.113).

Squire (1963) recommends asking students to stop their reading after a judicious interval to make predictions. Yet he also sees some kinds of questioning by students as actually detracting from "a more profound analysis." He perceives in questions such as: "Did Alfred reform? What happened when he got home? Did the mother 'apologize' for talking to him that way? What happened to Reverdy? and How did her parents feel to find her gone?" an "insistence that even obscure strands of the narrative be completed" and characterizes them as "unrelated to the essential experiences which the authors of these stores are trying to convey"(p.49).

Such a view is countered by Rosenblatt's (1978)

description of a poem as "an event in time." "It is not," she says "an object or ideal entity. It happens during a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text"(p.12). Mandel (1970) also recognizes that in responding to literature, just as there can be no "right" answers, there are no "right" questions. In Literature and the English Department he gives an account of a class discussion of Euripedes' Electra which centered on the farmer-husband: "Had I planned a lecture or a series of questions on Electra I am certain I would not have thought to mention the princess' husband....I do not remember who introduced the subject, but the students were clearly all immediately fascinated, not only by the moral questions concerning Electra's blatant, inhuman use of her humble husband, ...but also by artistic questions: 'Why would Euripedes create such a character in an otherwise spare plot? What is his function and purpose?'"(p.76).

Blackie (1978), too, sees a value in student questions. She writes, "When we, as adults, want to know something, we ask someone who might know the answer. In schools, when we, as adults and teachers, often (though not always) know more than our pupils, it is we who ask the questions"(p.181). To redress this imbalance Blackie asked groups of lower-sixth form "A" level students to formulate questions about two Wilfrid Owen poems. These were to be "questions to which they did not already know the answers" and "questions to which they would like to know the answers"(p.183).

Blackie found that at least initially in the class discussion of student questions she reverted to the traditional, directive, "intrusive" role of teacher. Nevertheless, students were able to work much out for themselves which might otherwise merely have been presented to them by the teacher. She concludes that "asking questions of themselves and each other seems to ensure that the questions discussed are those the students really want to know about, rather than those the teacher might think they want/ought to know about"(p.195).

Another British teacher, John Alcock (1976), set up a similar experiment with five secondary school pupils. He explained to them that "too many questions come from the teacher, who usually thought that he knew the answers; the most important questions might be those to which students--and perhaps teacher, too--did not know the answers"(p.58). Students were then left alone to write down their own questions about each of three poems. The subsequent discussion of the poems was led by Alcock who would not eliminate the role of teacher as questioner: "Where the pupils' questions fail, the teacher's must encourage, guide, stimulate....students learn how to inquire both by inquiring themselves and by observing others do so, and teachers' questions can be a guide to the inquiry process"(p.63).

But the questions of other students can also provide models, and where the teacher continues to play a major role as question asker and answerer, the student's response is dampened and muted. James Moffett (1976) provides a solution in his

suggestion that students discuss in groups questions raised in their minds while reading. Specifically, "the questions they pose may be confusions about things they know they did not grasp, something they want to know more about, or issues in the selection they want to talk about"(p.138).

Thus Moffett provides some rough categories of student questions, but we need to know more. How can student questions be classified? Are there differences in the kinds of questions asked by older and younger readers? Do better and poorer readers ask different kinds of questions? How do questions vary across different kinds of materials? How do student questions differ from those asked by teachers, by textbooks? Are there better ways to encourage student questions? And are there differences in the independent responses of those students who have been encouraged to ask questions and those in classes in which the discussion of literature continues to be shaped by the questions of "the teacher, the tester, or the textbook writer"? (Ortiz, 1977, p.114). In the study of student questions in response to literature, we have little in the way of answers, but many questions.

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